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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 001406

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: POLITICAL NOTES ON AMBASSADOR'S TRIP TO ANDEAN
REGIONS OF VENEZUELA

REF: A. CARACAS 1386
[1](#)B. CARACAS 1256

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Classified By: Political Counselor Robin D. Meyer
for Reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: The Ambassador traveled to two cities in Western Venezuela, Merida and Valera, from October 24-28, making additional stops in Carabobo, Portuguesa and the Andean highlands of the country. Among the highlights of the trip were the inauguration of the new round of the 2009/10 version of the Baseball and Friendship program, a courtesy call on the regional office of a legislator who is a member of the U.S. - Venezuela Friendship Group, a meeting with the opposition Mayor of Merida, the inauguration of an American Corner in Trujillo State, and a positive interview with the Merida State newspaper that the previous day had published an article "repudiating" the Ambassador's visit. The Ambassador's visits to both Merida and Valera were met with government incited protests. Most local reporting on the Ambassador's travels has been very positive. End Summary.

Valencia - Baseball and Friendship

[1](#)2. (U) To kick off the "Baseball and Friendship" Program, the Ambassador visited a recently inaugurated baseball complex in Valencia built by the largest Venezuelan beverage producer, Polar. The Embassy's organizing partner, Jose "Yo-Yo" Salas, and Polar representatives greeted the Ambassador and took him on a tour of the facilities where he met 60 underprivileged children and their parents. In all, more than 200 children and little league coaches participated in the clinic. Through a partnership with the Professional Baseball League of Venezuela, some of the participants went to a professional baseball game later that evening.

Acarigua - Visit to Chavista Deputy's District Office

[1](#)3. (C) On October 24 the Ambassador traveled to Acarigua, in Portuguesa State, where he met with Rafael Torrealba, the brother of National Assembly Deputy Francisco Torrealba and the director of Francisco's district office. Deputy Torrealba is the President of the lapsed U.S. - Venezuelan Parliamentary Group (ref B). During the cordial visit, Rafael Torrealba showed the Ambassador the district office and adjoining pro-government radio station, and discussed the challenges of establishing one of Venezuela's only district offices for an elected National Assembly representative.

Torrealba and the Ambassador discussed the economic impact of power outages in the largely agricultural state of Portuguesa, U.S. health care reform, and changes in domestic policy under the Obama Administration.

¶4. (U) On Sunday, October 25, the Ambassador visited the National Shrine of Our Lady of Coromoto, the Patron Saint of Venezuela, which was noteworthy for its state of disrepair.

Andean Highs and Lows

¶5. (C) The Ambassador was able to meet with the opposition Mayor of Merida, Lestor Rodriguez Herrera, on October 26. The Mayor complained of deliberate and constant sabotage by the State government and Governor Marcos Diaz Orellana. He claimed the Governor would not release public funds for trash pick-up and that the city of Merida had not received State permits for public housing projects. The Mayor predicted all but three seats in the State of Merida would go to the opposition in the 2010 National Assembly elections. Rodriguez Herrera stated that local leaders were largely responsible for the regional "No" victory in the 2009 referendum and said that he did not want "carpet baggers" ("paracaidistas") from Caracas tainting the opposition. The Mayor declared his intention to run for State Governor in ¶2012.

¶6. (U) The local Merida newspaper, Frontera, greeted the Ambassador's October 26 arrival in Merida with an article signed by pro-government journalist Julio Carrillo entitled, "An unwanted and repudiated visit," in which he called the Ambassador "an enemy of the Venezuelan people." The article asserted that, "This man comes representing the government of

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the USA, a government that exercises hegemonic influence, installs dictators, invades poor countries and brainwashes Latin American militaries to massacre their own people." The article called on demonstrators to gather at the Bolivar Plaza "to reject and denounce the bad children of Venezuela who shield themselves in the opposition and desire to bathe in the blood of the country and give our resources to the U.S. empire."

¶7. (U) Pro-Chavez Governor Marcos Diaz Orellana had declined the Embassy's written request or subsequent telephone calls requesting a courtesy call. The Ambassador was prevented from meeting with the Rector and attending a ceremony at the University of the Andes (ULA), at which he was scheduled to be given an award, by approximately 200-300 protesters who burned American flags, denounced the U.S. - Colombia Defense Cooperation Agreement, and shouted anti-American slogans. Media coverage of the event show Merida Governor Diaz encouraging protesters to denounce the US and holding a burning US flag.

¶8. (C) The Board of Directors of Merida's Chamber of Commerce and Industry hosted the Ambassador for a lunch. The Board contended that while there was some limited economic growth in the region, there was virtually no new investment due to fear of expropriation. The Vice-President of the Board noted that the government was still popular in the region largely because the opposition had yet to develop a decent platform from which to oppose the government. The owner of a local distillery recommended that the business sector begin to offer basic services to employees and family members, such as a health clinic, in response to the government's widely popular social programs. Board members also complained about difficulties in obtaining U.S. export licenses and inquired about the procedures for opening a Ronald McDonald Home in Merida.

¶9. (SBU) The Ambassador visited and toured the Centro Venezolano-Americano de Merida (CEVAM), one of four

bi-national centers in Venezuela. CEVAM hosted a reception in honor of the Ambassador's visit the evening of October 26, during which the Ambassador visited with approximately 40 alumni and Fulbrighters, as well as university students from the ULA campus.

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Trujillo Mules and Pro-Chavez Theatrics

¶10. (SBU) On October 27 the Ambassador traveled to the city of Valera, the economic hub of neighboring Trujillo State. The pro-Chavez Governor of Trujillo, Hugo Cabezas Bracamonte, did not respond to the Embassy's written request for a courtesy call, and the pro-Chavez Mayor of Valera, Temistocles Cabezas, did not attend a dinner at the home of a local university rector in honor of the Ambassador. The Ambassador did visit the University Valle del Momboy (UVM), an autonomous non-profit university well-known for its enterprising spirit and innovative projects emphasizing a commitment to sustainable development. The Ambassador was greeted by the University Rector, Francisco Gonzalez Cruz, and by over a dozen children. The Ambassador presented a symbolic donation of books, coupled with a grant, to the "Bibliomulas" (Book Mules) program. (Note: The Bibliomulas project, begun in 2001, uses mules to bring books and thereby the benefits of reading to the residents of the remote Andean regions. End Note.)

¶11. (C) Ambassador Duddy was to have completed his trip to Trujillo by inaugurating the newest American Corner located in the UVM library building, in downtown Valera. The ceremony, scheduled for October 27, had to be postponed by one day after approximately 50-60 pro-government protesters blocked access to the building. Protesters carried professionally produced banners protesting the US presence in Colombia and shouted, "They shall not pass," and "Piti-Yankee Out." Following RSO recommendations, the Ambassador returned to his nearby hotel.

¶12. (SBU) Early on October 28, after reading in the local paper about the "inauguration of the American Center" the previous day, the Ambassador with the rector, academic staff and members of the local community, inaugurated the American corner in a low-key event and dedicated its resources -computer equipment, book collections and electronic media - to the university and to the people of Trujillo. (Note: The newspaper article had apparently been written ahead of time

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and never updated. End Note.)

Media Coverage - Generally Positive

¶13. (U) Local press in Merida and Trujillo took special note of the Ambassador's presence, with the majority of the coverage positive. In Merida, La Frontera, the same paper that had earlier published an article "repudiating" his visit, featured a teaser and photo of the Ambassador on the front page of its October 27 edition, leading to a half-page article that highlighted the Ambassador's hope for a more positive relationship between the United States and Venezuela. It carried his comment that the number of visas the Embassy processes is proof that Venezuelans and Americans enjoy extensive ties. In a veiled reference to the anti-American protests, he noted that Venezuela's Ambassador to the United States, Bernardo Alvarez, frequently travels throughout the United States undisturbed. The newspaper "Pico Bolivar" covered the Ambassador's reception by Merida Mayor Lester Rodriguez in a large article above the fold on page three, while relegating a small piece about the burning of the American flag and the churlish comments of the Governor to the bottom corner of the same page. Coverage in Trujillo was also positive, with local newspapers explaining

the goals of the American Corner and running photos in which the Corner was decorated in red-white-and-blue for the Ambassador's visit.

¶15. (SBU) Comment: The Ambassador's trip to Merida and Trujillo was generally successful and positive in tone. Many people were anxious to meet him and to talk with him about everyday concerns, such as declining investment, electricity shortages, and increasingly high rates of crime. They were pleased with his presence in the region, an attitude reflected in the predominantly favorable news articles and interviews that accompanied his visit. End Comment.

CAULFIELD